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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001463

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: NEW PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR SEEKS RESUMPTION OF MILF
PEACE TALKS

REF: A. MANILA 1192 (FORMER MILITARY CHIEF TO HEAD PEACE
PROCESS)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1091 (CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS REMAINS KEY
ISSUE FOR PEACE TALKS)
[1](#)C. MANILA 1021 (AMBASSADOR AND FOREIGN SECRETARY
DISCUSS PEACE PROCESS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a one-on-one breakfast with Ambassador on June 18, President Arroyo's new top advisor on the peace process -- retired Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Hermogenes Esperon -- said he is working to end a six-month impasse in negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). A revised draft memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain approved by the Cabinet June 17 will be forwarded to the Muslim insurgents through Malaysian facilitators this week. Esperon appears eager to capitalize on his wealth of knowledge and experience on the Muslim insurgency, and his well-established contacts within Philippine military, security, and political circles to advance the Mindanao peace process. The Ambassador stressed to Esperon aware our concerns over the continuing impasse in peace negotiations, phased withdrawal of the Malaysian International Monitoring Team, and recent uptick in violence. Esperon welcomed the opportunity to travel with the Ambassador to Basilan in July, and voiced appreciation for the Ambassador's offer of a briefing on USAID, Department of Agriculture, and Public Affairs initiatives in conflict-affected areas, and discussions with U.S. counterparts from the United Kingdom and Australia on peace and security. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Retired Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Hermogenes Esperon officially took over as President Arroyo's top advisor on the peace process June 16. During a one-on-one breakfast with the Ambassador June 18, Esperon embraced his new role, praising the professionalism and accomplishments of his staff at the Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process. Ambassador stressed the importance of restoring momentum to the MILF peace process, while at the same time underscoring the impact the phased withdrawal of the Malaysian International Monitoring Team, and recent uptick in violence, including the May 29 bombing in Zamboanga City and June 8 kidnapping of ABS-CBN news broadcaster Ces Drilon, are having on the security situation in Mindanao.

[1](#)3. (C) Esperon was clearly focused on resuming the government's peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which have been stalled since last December. While emphasizing the importance of advancing the MILF peace process, Esperon informed Ambassador of the Cabinet's June 17 clearance of a revised draft memorandum of agreement (MOA) on ancestral domain. To allay concerns of some Cabinet members that the use of the term "freedom" in the draft agreement

could be construed as allowing independence for a new Muslim political entity, Esperon said the term was modified to "freedoms," thereby connoting individual rather than group rights. Esperon also noted that the draft MOA sought to alleviate MILF concerns over any reference to a constitutional approval process by simply saying the government was subject to "appropriate legal approval."

¶4. (C) Esperon said that he knows MILF Vice-Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jafaar on a personal basis, and hoped to make use of back-channel communications with the MILF once the government's draft MOA was provided to Malaysian peace talk facilitators. He was cautiously optimistic that the MILF would find the draft MOA acceptable so that both parties could return to the negotiating table by late June. Esperon said he recognized the important role played by the Malaysians but hoped he could get word to the MILF as well to signal the Philippine government's sincerity.

Esperon acknowledged that the August 11 Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) elections would be held as scheduled, ending months of speculation over a possible postponement. He said that he would accompany President Arroyo for a visit to Mindanao June 18, when Arroyo would announce her support for Zaldy Ampatuan's reelection as ARMM governor. Esperon viewed the three-year term of the next ARMM administration as "a transition period" for the creation of a new Muslim political entity, and the end of political clan politics as embodied in the Ampatuan family.

¶5. (C) Comment: Esperon possesses a wealth of knowledge and experience on the Muslim insurgency from his military days, and is now eager to return to Mindanao in his new capacity as

MANILA 00001463 002 OF 002

peace process advisor. Esperon expressed frustration and concern over the current security situation in the Sulu Archipelago, and looked forward to accompanying the Ambassador on a trip to Basilan in coming weeks. Esperon also welcomed the Ambassador's offer to arrange a briefing on USAID, Department of Agriculture, and Public Affairs initiatives in conflict affected areas, and to schedule a breakfast meeting with U.S. counterparts from Australia and the United Kingdom on the Mindanao peace process. Esperon was particularly interested in obtaining U.S. development assistance for the Liguasan Marsh area in central Mindanao and in reconstituting a lapsed ceasefire mechanism, the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG), which had played an important role in mitigating tensions.

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